

**A L D E B A R A N' S**  
**Sailing Circumnavigation**  
**35<sup>th</sup> Report**  
**New Zealand to Fiji**

**Having departed the Tauranga Bridge Marina on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> March, after sixteen months, and motoring to Pilot Bay, a mammoth distance of 2.5 miles, and anchoring there for five days we spent the time preparing for the start of the second half of our circumnavigation.**

On Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> March at 0625 hrs. we motored out of Tauranga Harbour, hoisted sails and in company with Maritime Express set a course for Slipper Island a distance of 41 miles. Both of us were sporting new mainsails made by Tony Turnburrow in Tauranga. The performance difference compared with our old mainsail was immediately noticeable and to balance it with our old headsail we had to put in a reef. Making good progress doing over 6 knots we decided to continue a further 18 miles to Whitianga. At 1500 hrs we again altered course for Mercury Cove on Great Mercury Island. Finally at 1700 hrs after 67 miles we picked up a mooring at Mercury Cove opposite the home of Michael Fay. Michael is perhaps best known by the sailing community for his involvement in New Zealand's earlier Americas Cup campaigns. After two days walking the island and of course socialising we set sail for the "Big Smoke" Auckland where we had a date with Malcolm and Helen on Muna to celebrate St Patrick's Day.

**Auckland & St Patrick's Day:**

Arriving at Bayswater Marina on the north shore of Auckland Harbour on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> March we immediately began meeting cruising friends, some of whom we had not seen since the Caribbean in 2000. Prominent among these were Sean Reilly from Leitrim and Erin O'Brien in their boat Whimsey. Approaching Whimsey on the marina we saw a note for us saying they were at the Fleadh Ceol (Gaelic for Music Festival) in Queen Street, Auckland. Thus started our St Patrick's Day celebrations.

"D" day the 17<sup>th</sup> March started with Guinness and champagne aboard Whimsey followed by the 10 minute ferry ride across the harbour to Auckland. Needless to say the Viaduct Basin, base for the Americas Cup was deserted and one wonders will it ever host the event again. It is certainly a huge financial loss to New Zealand. Anyway, there was no way it was going to dampen our spirits. After paying our respects at a couple of Irish establishments, we were naturally in good spirits.

St. Patrick was very lucky to have been born on the same date as Malcolm of Muna. Over the past four years we have celebrated this great phenomenon together with Malcolm and Helen. In 2000 we were in Monserrat in the Caribbean, in 2001 the Galapagos, in 2002 Tauranga, New Zealand and now in 2003 Auckland.

Unfortunately it does not look like we will be together in 2004 as our plans differ.

"The Fiddler" an Irish pub across the road from the city's famous Sky Tower was where we, while joining in with the "ceol agus craic", consumed the greatest volume of God's great "black" health drink, known to the outside world as "Guinness".

A Chinese meal in a fast food joint preceded our getting the ferry back to Bayswater and a final nightcap of Irish coffees aboard Aldebaran. Thus ended our 2003 St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

**My 60<sup>th</sup>:**

Leaving Auckland we cruised north until on 26<sup>th</sup> March when anchored behind a headland at Whangarei sheltering from a gale we celebrated my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. Before I got up that morning Olivia had adorned the saloon with "Happy 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday" banners. It certainly was not the venue for a surprise party and so with just the two of us this great milestone in man's life passed by. I was going to say it passed quietly by, but not so. Olivia baked an apple tart, my favourite, and put six candles, one for each decade, on it. Unfortunately due to the severity of the weather a very limited amount of alcohol was consumed just in case we had to go on deck for any reason. Perhaps we will have a bigger party for my 61<sup>st</sup> and of course for Olivia's 60<sup>th</sup> in XX years time.

## **Opua and the Bay of Islands:**

Continuing up the coast we had lovely day sails visiting all the popular anchorages including Tutukaka, Whangaruru, and Whangamumu before entering the Bay of Islands on 3<sup>rd</sup> April. From then until checking out of New Zealand on 7<sup>th</sup> May we cruised the Bay, and the very sheltered Whangaroa Harbour. The Bay of Islands can quite justifiably boast as having the best cruising waters in New Zealand. With so many islands you are sure of getting a sheltered anchorage to accommodation all wind directions and conditions. Opua is the yachting center in the bay and is the Port of Entry chosen by most yachts entering New Zealand. They have a large marina and many yachts never go beyond Opua. After Tauranga we found it expensive, isolated and full of biting sand flies. The nearby town of Pahia would be more appropriately named "Payhere". This is purely our impressions and may of course be contested by those who stayed there.

Across from Pahia is the lovely small town of Russell. It was the original capital of New Zealand and is well worth a visit.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> April we were joined by Ryan, my brother Jim's 19 year old son. They live in Melbourne and Ryan wanted to do his first ocean passage. Having joined us two weeks prior to heading for Fiji he was able to get to know a lot of our friends and of course familiarize himself with Aldebaran.

## **Farewell New Zealand:**

At 1400 hours on Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2003 we checked out of New Zealand after ten days short of eighteen months. After filling with diesel, saving the 12.5 sales tax, and taking delivery of our duty free booze we departed Opua Marina at 1545 hours. We had to have checked out before being eligible for the savings on the diesel and taking duty free alcohol aboard.

By right you are supposed to sail out of New Zealand waters after checking out but as it was late in the afternoon and we did not want to be crossing shipping lanes close to the coast during the night we anchored just inside the entrance to the Bay. After all the preparations and tension prior to leaving it was great to get to bed early and have a good nights sleep before embarking on the 1,200 mile passage to Savusavu in Fiji.

At 0730 hours next morning we upped anchor and by midday saw New Zealand disappear below the horizon. Conditions for the first twenty four hours, during which we covered 123 miles, were light necessitating some motoring. Day two had even less wind and saw us motor sail for the full 24 hours and covering 124 miles to position 31 degrees 50 minutes south and 176 degrees 20 minutes east. On this passage the advice is to get it over with as fast as possible due to the many lows crossing from the Tasman Sea. Saturday saw the wind fill in and for most of the next 24 hours we had nice light conditions sailing at 5 knots and covering another 120 miles. So, after three days we covered 367 miles with 871 miles still to go. Ryan settled in well but was getting it hard to sleep, we told him that after a few more days he would have no problem sleeping from exhaustion.

Day four saw us sailing the full 24 hours and covering 104 miles, an average of 4.3 knots per hour. We flew our cruising chute for about four hours.

Day five was again a mixture of sailing and motor sailing and we covered 126 miles to position 26-56 south / 179-34 east. Prior to leaving New Zealand we enrolled with Des on Russell Radio and checked in with him every evening. On giving him our position he would, according to his information, give us a weather prediction for the next twenty four hours. Besides getting weather forecasts from Des the radio schedule was a very good source of help if you had difficulties.

At 1200 hours on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> May we once again crossed the International Date Line, this time from East to West and thus gaining a day. However we did not adjust our watches or clocks as after a few more days we would be crossing back to the Eastern Hemisphere.

Day six saw the wind increase to 20/25 knots and of course sailing all day we had our best run of the passage so far covering 157 miles to position 24-39 south / 179-12 east. We had now sailed 754 miles from New Zealand leaving 496 miles to go. Conditions aboard were now getting unpleasant and Ryan's lack of sleep was now showing, but at least his beard was beginning to establish itself.

### **A small emergency:**

Early on the morning of the seventh day we discovered a very bad tear in the headsail and immediately had to furl it (roll it in on its furling unit). We had it reefed and do not know what caused the tear. It has been on the boat since it was launched in 1991 and we planned to buy a new one when buying the new mainsail in Tauranga but when we had to buy a new liferaft we put off the purchase. Luckily when we saw the wind increasing I had the staysail hanked to the inner forestay and it was therefore an easy job to hoist this smaller sail in lieu of the torn headsail. When I say it was easy I mean the necessary halyard and sheets (ropes) were in position, but going on deck to execute the hoisting was not so easy as the wind at this stage was gusting 30 knots with a very rough sea hitting us on the beam. Wearing a lifejacket and safety harness I cautiously made my way forward. On a number of occasions the boat was rolled so badly that I had to hold on with both hands. Olivia's final words to me every time I have to go forward in such adverse conditions are "be careful" as if I would be anything but. Ryan's extra pair of hands were much appreciated in these conditions.

### **South Minerva Reef:**

In planning this passage I decided to go by way of the notorious Minerva Reefs just in case we had to seek shelter. On the way south from Tonga in November 2001 we visited and stayed 5 days at North Minerva Reef (see our report 32), then the weather was good and we able to explore the reef at low water (it covers at high water). The direct route from New Zealand to Fiji passes almost 200 miles west of the Minerva Reefs and so if you plan to incorporate them in your passage you have to make plenty of easting. Lucky we did because with a bad forecast to were able to enter and anchor in South Minerva (position 23-55 south / 179-07 west) at 1630 hours on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup>. There were five other boats in the anchorage including friends Terry and Aerial from Canada on their boat Stella. The wind was now regularly gusting at over 30 knots. It was a sleepless night for everybody. Stella dragged her anchor and missed hitting us by inches. Holo Malana a boat from New Zealand on their first Ocean passage to Tonga had their brand new dinghy complete with a 15 hp outboard washed away. They had lots of problems with the boat on the way up from New Zealand and next morning were so downhearted they decided to sell the boat if they ever got to Tonga. We were anchored in 17 metres (56ft) and had all of our 80 metres (260ft) of chain out giving us an almost 5:1 scope on our 23kg (50lb) stainless steel delta anchor.

Terry who had launched his dinghy the previous day boarded Holo Malana and sorted out some of their problems and on the way back to his boat paid us a visit.

If we thought the past night was bad it was nothing compared to what we were about to experience during the forthcoming night. Just after midnight the wind veered to the east from northeast resulting in less shelter due to a much bigger fetch. In general the bigger the fetch the bigger the waves as they have further to travel unobstructed. Suddenly, at about 0130 hours our snubber, used to cushion the tension of the chain, broke. This was of great concern, Aldebaran was now snatching badly on her chain and under such stress the chain is likely to break. In the darkness and being surrounded by reefs such a break could be the end of Aldebaran. Lifting our anchor and trying to exit the reef in the dark was unthinkable. There was no alternative but to start the engine and motor into the wind trying to hold Aldebaran on station, while hand steering, in order to ease the strain on the chain until daylight when I would attempt to rig a new snubber. The crews of our neighbouring boats were all up tending to their problems, a number of them also broke their snubbers and one or two of them dragged their anchors. Daylight began to appear about 0645 hours and it was pleasing to see that we were all in one piece. With Ryan's help I rigged a new snubber while Olivia steered and held the boat on station.

It was obvious we could not stay in this exposed situation. One boat moved to the far side of the reef hoping to get a little more protection, a German boat who had just got an e-mail giving the sad news that the skippers mother died decided to leave and try to reach Tonga 300 miles to the northeast from where he might get a flight back in time for the funeral. Together with Stella and Holo Malana we decided to try and reach North Minerva Reef where we believed we could get better shelter.

When we began lifting our anchor it became obvious why we were snatching so badly, the anchor was securely snagged on a coral head giving us less than a 2:1 scope. The thought of having to don diving gear to free it was crossing my mind and one that I was not looking forward to in such rough conditions. It took us

more than twenty minutes, motoring in all directions to free it. Exiting the reef we hoisted sails and took off like a “scalded cat”. Even with the small staysail and two reefs in the mainsail we were being over powered, on reflection I should have put three reefs in the mainsail. With winds gusting to over 40 knots and massive seas we were glad we were only going about 25 miles. At times we were doing speeds of over 9 knots even with the fifteen to eighteen foot breaking waves hitting us on the beam. The previous day, in South Minerva, Olivia did some washing and left them steeping in our large bucket on the aft deck. Just before reaching North Minerva we looked behind and saw the washing being washed out of the bucket and over the side.

### **North Minerva Reef:**

The seas abated somewhat when we reached the lee of North Minerva and the narrow pass through the reef was easily spotted. Stowing the sails before entering the pass consumed a lot of my energy. At times going through the pass we were doing less than one knot even with the engine on full revs. The three mile crossing of the saucer shaped reef to the more sheltered east side took over an hour. On arrival we were a happy trio that anchored securely with about seventy metres of chain in ten metres of clear water. There were now a total of ten boats sheltering in the reef.

The Minerva Reefs cover completely at high tide and at low tide less than a metre shows. Imagine standing in the middle of a vast ocean on less than a metre of exposed coral and the nearest land hundred of miles away. North Minerva is about 4 kilometres (3 miles) in diameter and regular shaped with one narrow entrance on it’s west side. South Minerva is irregular shaped like the number eight, only the top half is accessible by yacht, the lower section can be explored by dinghy. Both of these infamous reefs have claimed many wrecks and lives. In 1854 Captain Denham of H.M.S. Herald chartered the two reefs. He named them Minerva after the whaling ship from Sydney that was wrecked there in 1829. The ship was sailing confidently across waters the charts showed as free of all obstacles when she rammed hard on South Minerva. Most of the crew took to three boats two of which eventually reached safety while the third was never heard of again.

More recently in 1960 a Japanese fishing vessel ran aground again on South Minerva. The crew were rescued by another Japanese boat. Two years later on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1962 a yacht on passage from Tonga to New Zealand ran aground on the same reef with seventeen men, all Tongans aboard. Lucky for them that the Japanese fishing boat preceded their grounding by only two years and so they were able to shelter in the wreck. Even what they salvaged from their yacht, the remaining stores they found in the fishing boat and sea food they caught it was not sufficient to sustain them and gradually their health deteriorated. By September 30<sup>th</sup> three died. From what wreckage they collected they built an 18ft boat and on October 7<sup>th</sup> the Captain his son, who was the strongest swimmer, and one other set off in a northern direction in the hope of reaching safety somewhere in Fiji. After almost a week at sea and with their small supply of food and water exhausted they spotted land. In trying to find an entrance through the reef their boat was capsized and the two mile swim to the beach unfortunately claimed the life of Sateki, the Captains son. Thanks to their effort and sacrifice, help was summoned and the remainder of the twelve crew, another man died since October 7<sup>th</sup>, were rescued. Much more recent in November 2002 a yacht heading for New Zealand left North Minerva and ran into South Minerva. The crew were rescued but the boat was a total loss.

Now back to the present. For three days we were unable to launch our dinghy due to the constant 30+ knot wind and so everybody was confined to their boats. We did however have good fun on our VHF radios with the more artistic crew members composing poems and songs about our predicament. By the fourth day with the wind easing the launching of dinghies was possible and so began the many boat visitations and snorkeling expeditions. Ryan went searching for crayfish (lobsters) on the reef with four Kiwi lads and came back with about twelve. For the remainder of our stay we lived, like the other boats, on crayfish.

### **Sail Repair:**

On the Monday we spent eight hours repairing the four metre (13.5ft) tear in our headsail. Using heavy webbing I hand sowed where there were multiple layers of cloth and Olivia using her sewing machine completed the remainder. It was eight hours of hard work under difficult conditions in the confinement of the saloon. But we did it and so far the repair is holding.

### **Mayhem at sea:**

The yachts that for one reason or another could not reach the Minervas were having a terrible time at sea. Some were hove to others had full storm rigs up and all were reporting awful conditions and damage. Our good friends Brian and Sue on Nepenthe who left New Zealand a day ahead of us were experiencing their worse condition ever. They were only a few miles from North Minerva when the weather began to deteriorate but because of problems with their engine were afraid to enter the pass. For another seven days we listened on the radio to them describing the terrible conditions they were having. We kept trying to cheer them up by saying the forecast was indicating a moderation. What else could we say? There was no point in telling them the truth, that it was going to get worse. They reported, waves breaking over the boat, the boat being knocked over on it's side, and the inside of the boat being like a washing machine complete with water. Of the many radio conversations we had with them only twice did they sound extremely depressed and down. They eventually reached Savusavu and safety much to the relief of everybody.

### **The final leg:**

On Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May at 0815 hours we lifted our anchor and headed for the pass that would take back to the ocean. Once outside we hoisted sails and for the next three days had a boisterous sail to Savusavu 439 miles to the north. Late on the Sunday evening we again crossed the International Date Line this time from west to east and losing a day, but as we did not change our clocks when crossing from east to west twelve days ago it did not make any difference. On the Sunday night we reduced sail in order to slow down so as not to be approaching the reef strewn coastline in the dark. Five of the boats that were sheltering with us in Minerva reached Savusavu on the Monday morning.

### **Fiji:**

Savusavu (16-47 south / 179-29 east) has two marinas, they are not really marinas but rather providers of mooring buoys, although The Copra Shed on whose mooring we stayed have a small dock to which you can berth stern to. Within two hours of arriving we were cleared in after visits from, firstly the Department of Health followed by Custom and finally Immigration. The Department of Agricultural never turned up. During their visits they cleaned us out of coke and biscuits. The only cost was \$33 (about 16euros) for the Health Officer.

**“Welcome to Fiji was the welcome we got from each one of them”**

### **Omissions:**

We omitted many more interesting details from this report in order to keep it to a reasonable length, sorry about that.

### **IMPORTANT:**

Notifying everybody via our hotmail address can takes days as they only allow you send to fifty address per day. Subsequently some of you may get notification via our boat e-mail. It is a great system but unfortunately we can only send and receive short messages. If you get such notification and wish to reply PLEASE do not re-send the original message and PLEASE no attachments, photos or jokes.

**Our next report** the 36<sup>th</sup> will cover our adventures in Fiji.

**Please keep your e-mails coming, we love to get your comments and news.**

**Pat and Olivia Murphy, s/y ALDEBARAN in the South Pacific**